



Red Ledges The Anatomy *of a* Golf Course

by Mike Stansfield

Michelangelo reportedly once said, “In every block of marble I see a statue, I see it as plainly as though it stood before me, perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away its rough walls to reveal it to other’s eyes as mine already sees it.” Jack Nicklaus sees his golf courses as Michelangelo saw his statues — he just needs to reveal the course’s character, style and personality to other’s eyes as his have already imagined it.

How does one go about conceptualizing, designing and building a golf course? That’s the first question I asked when a group of us caught up with Nicklaus as he completed his final inspection of the new Red Ledges Jack Nicklaus Signature Course in Heber City. According to Nicklaus, “it’s a group effort” and largely determined by the location and

unique characteristics of the land the course will sit on. Nicklaus often says that what ends up on the top of a piece of ground is a piece of him, But he also carefully adds, “What goes beneath that piece of ground is a collaboration of a talented team” that includes designers who work both in the field and in the design studio.

The first phase in every design is what is called the site analysis, during which time the Nicklaus Design Team determines what opportunities are available at a particular site and what makes the site unique. Once the initial survey of the property has taken place, time is taken to involve the client and to determine the needs and goals of the client and the project.

Once that has been determined the land plan-

ning takes place. Working with the project owner, the golf course location is selected and a routing of the holes is created. Once the routing is completed the conceptual and strategic design of the golf course is undertaken. During this time the course’s character, style and personality are developed as the team tries to incorporate and blend the surrounding natural environment into the eventual look and feel of the course, while creating a variety of different golf shots, angles, hole lengths, and hazards.

Before construction starts a grading plan is developed that details how much and where the soil should be moved and how the elevations will be created so that players will be able to see all of the obstacles in front of them. A clearing plan then documents what existing vegetation



Jack Nicolas points out proposed changes on his last inspection visit to Red Ledges in Heber City.

will be preserved and how the course will take advantage of the unique characteristics that are part of a chosen site. Once this is completed an agronomist is brought in to consult on the climate, soils, water quality and other issues used in determining which grasses will be used.

The final element in the plan is how to use grading to produce grassing plans while working with an engineer to create the needed drainage and irrigation system for the golf course. Then as any management course will tell you, it's time to execute the plan.

So when asked about what drew him to the Red Ledges property, other than his friendship with former Ryder System CEO Tony Burns, the project owner; he immediately says the grand vistas and rock outcroppings that give name to the project.

Standing on the tee box of the signature par-3 hole, with the green nestled up next to the outcropping of the Red Ledges, you can view spectacular Mount Timpanogos far in the distance as well as Deer Creek Reservoir along with a panoramic view of the beautiful Heber Valley. Spectacular views surround you in all directions and these are the "great vistas" that challenged Jack's imagination.

Because of its unique location, on the red foothills of Heber City, the course follows the natural characteristics of the land, using gullies, washes, rock formations and cedar trees to frame the holes

as well as to create hazards that can challenge the best of golfers.

Little dirt was moved at the Red Ledges which according to Jack is very unusual for a mountain golf course. He took advantage of the natural landscape as he carefully carved and sculpted the fairways and greens out of the natural environment.

Since the Red Ledges is a Jack Nicklaus Signature course, Nicklaus was totally involved. He has been here eight to ten times during the 2-year construction and has been intimately involved in the routing and look of the course. When asked he says, "I'm responsible for everything you can see, others for what you can't see. I help put a little lipstick on the golf course as well as to make sure you don't have too much."

He continued, "As I've become older I've become more aware of who is playing the golf course. I want the average golfer to have a chance, only 1.8% of golfers play from the back tees, 98.2% from the blue or white tees. So who do you build the golf course for? The last two days I've been getting to playability. I look at whether it is a good hole, is it playable and is it fun to play."


When asked whether there was something similar in all his designs, Jack immediately replied, "I hope not. I try not to use anything that says Jack's been here. We want to repeat philosophy not a look.

There is nothing new in golf course design, it's all in how you apply it."

Since Jack's August visit was his last visit to Red Ledges, the changes he requested were made overnight. All that is left is to finish growing in the golf course.

With 56 courses under construction in 30 countries, Jack loves being busy. But not too busy to hurry home to watch his grandchildren play football or to watch his first grandchild graduate from high school. From Heber City he was headed to Idaho, the Bahamas and on to the Dominican Republic.

Scheduled for opening in Fall 2009 the Red Ledges Golf Course is part of the planned Red Ledges recreational community which will also include a Nicklaus Design nine-hole short course, a Jim McLean Golf Practice and Instructional Facility, a Cliff Drysdale Tennis Academy, along with a spa, equestrian center, an extensive network of hiking, biking, snowshoeing and horseback riding trails, a ski-in/ski-out club at Deer Valley as well as private club boats at Jordanelle.

Red Ledges will be a gated community with more than 1,200 homes across nearly 2,000 acres. 

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